DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 027 703 EF 002 388

By-Brush, Martha S.

Theaters in Elementary Schools. AIA School Plant Studies.

Report No-BT1-51
Pub Date Mar 63
Note-4p.
Journal Cit-Journal of the American Institute of Architects; Mar 1963
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.30
Descriptors-Auditoriums, Building Materials, Consultants, *Design Needs, *Elementary Schools, Lighting, Production Techniques, *School Design, Theater Arts, *Theaters, Volunteers

A national volunteer program for producing a children's theater in elementary schools is severaly limited by the inadequacy of theater facilities in local school systems. A general discussion of the theater program is presented, the current state of theater facilities in elementary schools, difficulties in play production, and possible causes for limited facilities. In addition to general problems of sight and hearing, specific areas include scene changing, lighting, and special effects. Recommendations include the use of theater design consultants from non-profit agencies to provide at least one adequate theater facility for each grouping of several schools. (MM)

ED021703

THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS
1735 New York Avenue N. W., Washington 6, D. C.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Robt. E. Koehler, Ed, AIA Journal TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

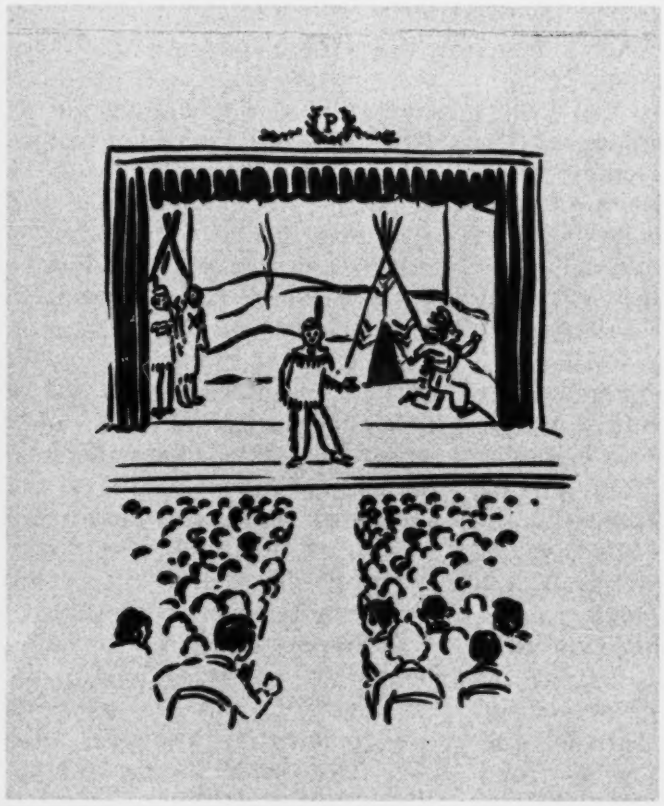
Nonprofit organization

U. S. Postage
PAID
Washington, D. C.
Permit 4398

AIA *School Plant Studies*

BT 1-51

Theaters in Elementary Schools.



by **Martha S. Brush**

EF 002388

One of a series of papers prepared by members of the AIA Committee on School Buildings, and by selected specialists, to make laymen aware of school building problems and trends and to stimulate discussion. They are not intended to be definitive last words and carry only the authority of their respective authors. New subjects are being worked on and contributed articles are welcome. Reprints of these non-technical articles are widely distributed to educators and interested laymen. One copy of each current issue will be sent free of charge—additional copies 10¢ each.

Reprinted from Journal of The American Institute of Architects *for March 1963*

Theaters in Elementary Schools

by **Martha S. Brush**

Drawings by Mrs C. Tibbott

► There are over 300 volunteer groups trouping children's plays to public schools all over the United States. Most are members of The Children's Theatre Conference, a division of The American Educational Theatre Association (AETA). Thus the opinions expressed in this article are the concerns of many people other than this writer.

The main object of taking children's plays into the schools is to expose youngsters to live theater and to find and produce carefully-chosen plays for children with the highest possible production standards. Most of the people involved in this operation are female volunteers who direct, stage manage, act as crew, design, make and paint their own sets and costumes, and in many cases are the actual performers. Whenever possible, children are used in children's roles, and men, possibly college students, are recruited for male roles.

Very few elementary schools have any facility that could be called adequate for a well-mounted play. After all the basis of all drama is to see and to hear. The word "auditorium" is self-expressive. There are three paramount reasons for this lack of adequate facilities:

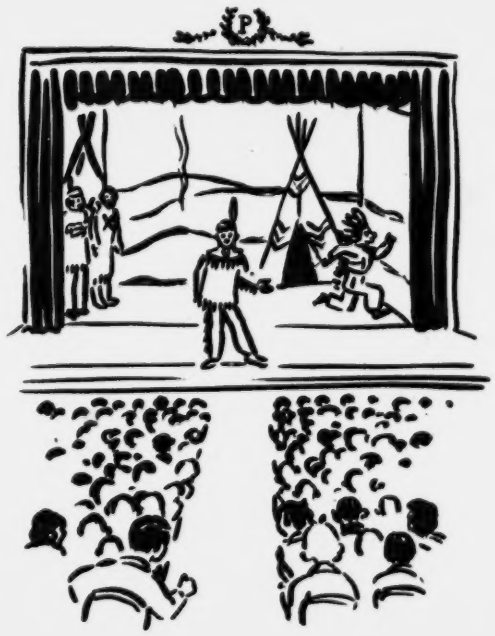
• Most school boards in this day of emphasis on the sciences are loath to spend money for anything that is considered a frill. But scientific brains come from children who have developed creative imagination. Drama, which is a component of all the arts and a combination of many of them, surely contributes to this indispensable characteristic of future scientists.

• Architects employed by school boards are seldom trained in theater planning, and too often they are confined by a budget which, they feel, prohibits the calling-in of a theater consultant when the time comes to plan the auditorium. The AETA has such consultants available, but there is a deplorable lack of communication, at this time, between school architects and theater consultants. This means that a great many capable architects do not understand that a consultant's fee may save money, time and headaches and, therefore, is well worth the cost.

• Most elementary school auditoriums are built to double as cafeterias and/or gymnasiums and, in some cases, study halls, which can only mean that as auditoriums they are not adequate. It is perfectly conceivable that a cafeteria can serve as a study hall, a lecture hall, or a space for physical education, but an auditorium, to be worthy of its name, should have at least an adequate stage, some simple lighting equipment and carefully studied sight-lines, which would be greatly enhanced by a sloping floor. George Pierce Baker, long-time head of the Yale School of Drama, reiterated constantly to his students that: "There are two things anyone attending a play has a right to expect; one is to see, the other is to hear." It has been my misfortune not to be able to do either in most elementary school auditoriums that I have had anything to do with.

Stage Design

Let us start with the stage. Usually it is a glorified platform with curtains, a hard wood floor and, sometimes, (but not very often) one bridge of lights, controlled by the conventional kind of light switch found in any home. It should be obvious even to the neophyte that these conditions are less than ideal for any sort of a play. There is no room to cross over backstage, no



space to handle costumes or store scenery for shifting sets and no dressing rooms for the performers. The proscenium opening is so narrow that only those fortunate enough to sit dead center can see the size of the room, and the lack of any acoustical treatment prohibits hearing beyond the tenth row of the movable desks, cafeteria benches, or whatever serves as seats.

Now this is all well and good if one is attending a lecture or a monologue by someone standing center stage, but it presents insurmountable problems to the director of a play. It is impossible to have each cast member dash to center stage, say his line and jump out of the way for the next actor to take his place in order to be seen or heard.

The most imaginative scene designer can hardly produce sets that can be easily moved from school to school without being able to drive a nail into the stage floor. In many schools bracing sets with nails is prohibited, and in those where it is allowed, it is next to impossible. Architects are used to using hardwood floors in areas where there is a great deal of traffic. Unfortunately, they often do not realize that a stage floor, to be at all utilitarian, must be of softwood, such as pine or fir. Try driving a nail into a hardwood floor and you will find this statement is not an exaggeration.

Sets and Special Effects

Now we come to the lights. Most children's plays have many magic effects which can only be accomplished with lights. Even when the lighting technician is fortunate enough to have a small portable dimmer and the proper equipment to supplement the existing fixtures, all too often there is no way to darken the cafetorium, gymtorium, or what-have-you.

James Hull Miller is a great proponent of the open stage auditorium (see "The General Auditorium," August 1960 issue of the *AIA Journal*). He feels that it is more flexible, cheaper and a space saver. We do not agree. What difference is there in the cubage if a building goes up instead of out? I maintain that the "up" has an advantage in cost (but I'm no architect and not much of a mathematician). There is, I agree, flexibility, but a theater of this type must use "projected scenery" (a fairly com-

plicated process) or scenery built on dollies or wagons (sets constructed on platforms which roll on and off stage). In the first place, it takes a great deal of wing space to line these platforms up for quick changes, as of necessity they are sometimes 4′x12′ or even larger. In the second place, it takes *man* power, and I do mean MAN, to move them on and off stage and to load and unload them from the scenery truck as it goes from school to school.

The concept of an open stage vs the combination of apron and contained stage may indeed be an answer for university and high school auditoriums because there they have *man* power. In children's theater trouping units we are talking about *woman* power almost exclusively.

With a loft and counterbalanced rigging, women can shift scenes quickly and smoothly by bringing in back-drops that have been flown, just by pulling a rope. This covers elaborate set changes and thus the play can move continuously without intermissions. It also accomplishes two very important things —it shortens the play (grades 1-6 make up a large part of a children's theater audience, and their span of attention is limited). It also does not give time for the otherwise inevitable eating and drinking and running up and down the aisles.

Most plays for children have several sets, and often a trouping group will give as many as fifty performances of a single play. Of necessity, there must be three or four trained crews for each play, and the crews must be small. No volunteer, no matter how dedicated (and children's theater volunteers are a dedicated lot), can be expected to give more than a reasonable amount of time away from home and family. With counterbalanced rigging, as few as four women can handle a complicated play. With dollies it would take three times that many.

The late Frank Lloyd Wright, in the only theater he designed (the famous Kalita Humphreys Memorial Theatre in Dallas), used a circular stage in a circular auditorium. He saw the need for a loft—children want to see Peter Pan really *fly* and Alice really *fall down* that Rabbit Hole. These effects and many others can be accomplished much more easily with a stage with a loft. Try "flying" an actor from a 12-foot ceiling.

Size

Many high school and university theaters have more than adequate facilities. Many give one play for children during their season, but for the most part these auditoriums are not available to the volunteer trouping units. Full-time drama programs of their own are in operation. Most of them also have a seating capacity of 1600 or so. Children cannot possibly project their voices enough to be heard in a place of this size without expensive sound equipment. Also the child in the audience cannot feel any intimacy with the actors on stage. (Identifying with the actors is a very important factor in children's theater.) Therefore, I go along with Wright *and* with Miller in the widening of the seating arc, but I maintain that this can be accomplished with a wider proscenium opening plus an apron which projects far enough into the auditorium to allow the child-audience to feel a part of the play.

I am not suggesting that every elementary school being built today should have a complete theater as part of its plant. This is, I realize, unrealistic budget-wise. I *am* suggesting that school architects and theater consultants get together and plan at least one really adequate facility to serve five or six schools in a given area.

This has been successfully accomplished in several cities, where the Board of Education allows the use of school buses to transport the children to the theater (some during and some after school hours). The job of selling the importance of theater for elementary children to these school boards was done almost entirely by children's theater volunteers.

This article is not intended to be completely negative. More and more communities have realized the importance of live theater for elementary children and are supporting it through PTAs and other civic organizations. What we need for the future is better-equipped auditoriums so that as the trouping units strive toward greater perfection, the auditoriums in the elementary schools will keep in step. *Please*, let's have closer cooperation between the school boards, their architects and the theater consultants. Better auditoriums will be built in our elementary schools only when this problem of communication among the interested parties has been solved.

The American Institute of Architects now has a Committee on Theatre Architecture. It is my understanding that the members of this committee intend to work closely with the theater consultants of the AETA. This is a tremendous step in the right direction, and both organizations are to be congratulated for recognizing and trying to fill a great need in our future elementary school plants. ◄

PRINTED IN USA